The play's storyline

Making Friends is about nursing student Max, medical student Jalisa and a rather grumpy retired man called Arthur.

Arthur disapproves of the gardening practices of two young medical students who have the allotment next to his, which was previously kept by Arthur’s recently deceased friend.

Arthur has lost his wife through dementia and is finding it difficult to cope with his losses and his arthritis.

A clash of cultures occurs when Arthur confronts the students holding a rowdy barbecue on the allotment. But Arthur has an accident witnessed by Max and Jalisa, who call an ambulance and then visit him in hospital. Eventually, they become friends and the students understand what Arthur is going through.

Towards the end of one of our lectures at the University of Surrey earlier this year, the tutor asked for volunteers to participate in a project. The aim was to develop nursing students' empathy with older people.

Our tutor wanted us to produce a radio play, called Making Friends, that could be used to help other students gain an insight into older people's lives and the challenges they face.

Childhood memories

This approach had not been tried before, so I was immediately interested. I was joined by six student colleagues and our first task was to meet with Age UK members to learn about older people’s concerns.

In our first session, the people from Age UK talked about their childhood memories, which we hoped to incorporate into the play. They also discussed the care they had received from health professionals, some of which had been below standard owing to communication problems and uncaring attitudes.

They cited examples of good care, and positive behaviour included a friendly manner, taking the time to make a cup of tea for a patient and ensuring they have important items within easy reach.

Playwright and Age UK member Ann Emery used these comments to write the first draft of Making Friends, which was presented at the second meeting.

My fellow students and I, along with the Age UK members, were asked for our thoughts on the draft. Then we were put into mixed groups of students and Age UK members and were asked for our views on the play’s main characters.

The third session involved recording the play at the university’s recording studio. This was overseen by Brian Johnson, an experienced broadcast and sound engineer. The various parts were played by students and Age UK members. I was lucky enough to play Max, a nursing student, for which I had to devise ways of sounding empathetic and caring.

Some of my colleagues assisted with the production by providing sound effects and voice-overs.

Broadcast

The play was produced primarily as a teaching tool to highlight the importance of empathy when caring for older patients. A clip has been broadcast on BBC Surrey radio.

I feel privileged to have taken part in this project and hope that this novel approach to working with older people to communicate the basic tenets of caring and empathy will be adopted by others.

Everyone involved thoroughly enjoyed the experience and we were sad when it concluded. We are hoping the Age UK members will be able to attend our graduation ceremony in 2014.

My lasting memory of this venture will be the fun we had and the energy, humour and vitality that the Age UK members brought to the project.

Owen Davies is a nursing student at the University of Surrey.